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How the Contemporary Shifted Magical Realism to the Global: An Examination of Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* and Allende's *The House of the Spirits*

The term 'magical realism' has grown from a genre of fiction firmly centered within Latin American literature and has, over the years, come to be associated with marginalized writers across the globe to voice their struggles and those of their community. Magical realism's birth as a concept is still debated. However, scholars, such as Tommaso Scarano, suggest one aspect of a magical-realistic text accomplishes "narrat[ing] the real, but privileging those aspects that are unrealistic, or beyond the bounds of the normal" (Scarano 20). Two novels paraded as magical realism works are *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende and *Tropic of Orange* by Karen Tei Yamashita. While they both certainly exemplify unrealistic and, at times, marvelous events within their respective stories, *Tropic of Orange*, published 15 years after *The House of the Spirits*, represents magical realism's evolution as a literary genre as critics argue we as a globalized society have moved into the contemporary (Williams 2014). *House of the Spirits* utilizes magical realism to critique how women deal with and heal

through trauma. In contrast, *Tropic* broadens magical realism to critique an ever-increasing globalized world dominated by Western foreign policy and border control.

Allende does not move past the individual and their connection or experience with the magical in her novel; this leads to the narrowing of magical realism to focus heavily on women's healing through various trauma. *The House of the Spirits* follows the multi-generational story of the del Valle and Garcia families centered around Clara the psychic. She can float around the house, communicate with the dead, foretell the future, and discern where lost items are, such as her mother's severed head (Allende 136). At times, her family members and husband become startled by her abilities but quickly come to view them as another part of living with Clara; her clairvoyance is a talking point around the neighborhood, but it never moves into the outlandish. However, her abilities never influenced more than household affairs–not when a devastating earthquake or recession came about–because, for Allende, her use of magical realism critiqued women's trauma and how their issues are cast as insignificant despite men's insistence on their love and caress. Two specific scenes in the novel describe Allende's stance on how women heal through trauma: Clara's defiance and her spiritual message to her granddaughter, Alba.

Allende depicts Clara's trauma in realistic terms but writes her mending process as one of enclosure within the unreal and her like-minded community. The first scene starts with Clara and Esteban, her husband,

arguing over their daughter, Blanca, having sex with one of the poor neighbors' sons. Esteban strikes Clara, "Blood was flowing from her nose. When she opened her mouth, she spat out several teeth, which fell to the floor, and a thread of bloody saliva trickled down her chin and neck" (Allende 223). Clara and Blanca then leave Tres Marias and move back to the mansion in the city, where the house experiences communal and spiritual growth in her husband's absence (Allende 233). The physical violence Esteban inflicts upon Clara is depicted in utmost realism; there are no spirits to comfort her or her daughter. When they arrive home, Clara is able to interact with her spiritual friends and slowly begins to read the future again. Allende here exemplifies how women's trauma should be portrayed as a real traumatic event that cannot be ignored, glossed over, or described with magical elements. The magical comes after the instance when the healing begins. These restorative moments require the supernatural to show the reader that women are in charge of their lives because, externally, the patriarchy proclaims otherwise. Clara is capable of building up her community within the city and begin forming a connection with her children. Allende even criticizes the continual oppression yet utter desire for women's approval by having Esteban come to Clara and ask her if she believes he will win the Senate seat (250). He does this because he believes in her clairvoyant powers despite his ridicule in several instances throughout the novel. Esteban suppresses all those who oppose him but cannot help but attempt to form a connection with the women in his life. He

is a perfect metaphor for the patriarchy's continual reliance on women despite their ridicule and violence toward them.

Continuing how Allende works magical realism into her characters' healing through trauma, Clara's granddaughter, Alba, uses the supernatural to survive and move past her suffering. The second scene follows Alba, after having been raped and tortured by Colonel Garcia, alone in a sealed cellar, ready to give up on her life when the spirit of Clara returns to her. "Her Grandmother Clara…appeared with the novel idea that the point was not to die, since death came anyway, but to survive, which would be a miracle" (460). Alba's own physical, emotional, and psychological torture is illustrated through blurred realistic lines, too painful for Allende to instantiate in great detail, but it is Clara's spirit that saves her state of mind. Allende renders the unreal in her story to intimately connect with her female characters and heal them from their trauma. Magical realism is transformative for women in this novel, and it allows Allende to critique the actual abuse they suffer and the journey of finding themselves once again. Allende's magical elements focus on the individual woman; the marvelous encourages growth and exploration out of the trauma they suffer at the hands of the men in their lives.

Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* critiques a globalized world where endless communication vies for people's attention, which places her work firmly in the contemporary. Where postmodern "focus[es] on language itself, exposing the constructedness of…assumed categories," the

contemporary within literature “responds to what is called ‘neoliberalism,’ the turn away from the liberal welfare state to privatization and the shrinkage of government services” (Williams 2-4). *Tropic* has been called a post-modern novel by critics viewing Yamashita’s overlapping metanarrative structures and her “networks of mobile and contingent forces” (Blyn 192; Dimitriou 28). However, I argue *Tropic* resembles more closely a contemporary novel with her distinguished consciousness of time and focus on societal issues; one of her characters, Buzzworm, a Black veteran who helps the homeless and is plugged into the radio 24/7, exemplifies what Jeffrey Williams calls “hyperconscious of time” (2). This ability to be plugged into the various news sources at all hours of the day is a leading instrument for Yamashita; her characters are both victims and proponents of a globalized structure to connect anybody and everybody who can listen. While Yamashita’s work can certainly be classified as post-modern by analyzing her use of expertly structured chapters, I believe the issues she focuses on and how she masterfully weaves those interconnecting and global problems land her squarely in the contemporary. The traumatized and multitemporal ways of viewing the world require Yamashita’s use of magical realism to take on new aspects.

Not only does Yamashita’s hyperawareness of time bring her novel into the contemporary, but it is also the first way she applies magical realism to a broader perspective of people. As Williams writes, “Instant and constant communication roots us in the present as never before, and the

speed with which we traverse space heightens the impact of globalization" (2). This is seen in two distinct motions between her characters: one where characters reflect steadfast devotion to instant communication and another where characters cross the United States/Mexico border throughout the novel. Focusing first on instant communication, as noted above, Buzzworm's constant listening to the radio. His consistent dedication to the news and music playing around him reveals to Buzz a slip in the supposed consistent connection of globalization. "Maybe this twenty-four hour attachment to the waves was doing it. Doing it to his brain…Time stood still momentarily. Time stood still eternally…And then there were those stations with the dead air like a dead hum, a buzz: the eternal buzz" (Yamashita 137). This supernatural stoppage of time only perceptible to Buzzworm uncovers an inherent issue with globalization and its supposed instantaneous communications. It is not sustainable.

Additionally, Yamashita briefly supernaturally exposes to Buzz how the concept of a globalized world will be unable to continue as things stand now. As Sue-Im Lee writes, "This new model of global collectivity bears the seeds of its own negation, demonstrating the fragility, and indeed, the impossibility, of achieving an absolute universalism" (503). What Lee means here is that the global collective "we" is unable to be achieved when there are tyrants, such as the United States, inflicting imperialist rules on other countries through unfair trade agreements and by the treatment of their citizens. Buzz witnesses this toxicity seeping through with his commitment

to helping the homeless of Los Angeles. However, he also supernaturally witnesses the more significant effects of this “global collectivity” when time stops for him (503). The stoppage of time is a breaking down of the system, as shortly afterward, he begins to hear conflicting messages spread across the radios before the chapter ends. Yamashita bases her characters in the real, the contemporary, where they interact with each other constantly across different types of media. However, her deployment of magical realism allows them to witness larger-than-life global issues and put them into action, such as crossing the border or a wrestling match.

Moving on to how Yamashita employs magical realism through her extended metaphorical critiques of immigration and borders, she centers immigrants' struggles around a native orange’s voyage to the United States. The reader follows the journey of an orange that is “a literalization of the Tropic of Cancer…it drags along with it the Tropic of Cancer, bending time and space between the northern and southern parts of the Western hemisphere” (Dimitriou 30). The orange morphs the geography of the Western hemisphere to incorporate Yamashita’s utilization of magical realism and its portrayal of how transnational migration is witnessed and experienced by those living in Mexico and the United States. Something as simple as an orange becomes the catalyst of this story because it turns out that even an orange is subjected to the globalizing effects of imperialist borders that separate natives from their land and the neoliberalist economic policies that define them. The economic policies divorce labor and profit

from those producing goods in Mexico and relinquish power from whose labor the profit derives.

These globalizing effects are shown when characters who are not United States citizens try to cross the border. Arcangel, a semi-prophetic character who travels North throughout the book, comes face-to-face with a United States Border Patrol agent when he attempts to cross the border. The agent questions him on his education, his name, age, his business for entering the United States, and his passport, and tells Arcangel that California currently has a ban on all oranges, to which Arcangel responds

> "But this is a native orange!" he yelled, but his voice was swallowed up by the waves of floating paper money: pesos and dollars and reals, all floating across effortlessly–a graceful movement of free capital, at least 45 billion dollars of it, carried across by hidden and cheap labor. Hundreds of thousands of the unemployed surged forward–the blessings of monetary devaluation that thankfully wiped out those nasty international trade deficits" (200).

Yamashita carefully notes that money moves first in this paragraph before human labor, which generates money in the first place. With this "graceful movement of free capital," Yamashita criticizes how those who toil in the fields or factories, manufacturing goods for America, cannot see any substantial profit. Privatized capital efficiently moves across the border while the natives creating the goods are subjected to rigorous questioning. Dimitriou states, "Arcangel rallies against the very logic of the border and

its reifying history–one that makes illegal aliens out of natives and introduces policy that disenfranchises and impoverishes those whom, like the orange, already find themselves alienated from their origins" (43). The orange and its inhabitants can cross the border with the help of Arcangel and the orange, literally bringing with it the South and thousands of disenfranchised natives where they are finally able to see the fruits of their labor in an epic final wrestling match between Arcangel and a personified metaphor for U.S. transnational economic policy.

Yamashita continues her use of extended magical realist metaphorical critiques by analyzing neoliberalism and how agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) have negatively impacted those working in Mexico. Yamashita creates the character of SUPERNAFTA or "SUPERSCUMNAFTA," a wrestler who personifies the creation of NAFTA and his opponent, El Gran Mojado, who is Arcangel in disguise (133). When they face each other in the ring in Los Angeles, after Arcangel has shifted the topography of L.A. by bringing with him the South and her native orange and cheap labor, Yamashita envisions a condemnation towards the advent of NAFTA and what Sue-Im Lee writes as the globalist 'we.' El Gran Mojado speaks on this perspective as he stands in front of countless viewers in the Pacific Rim stadium "*The myth of the first world is that development is wealth and technology progress. It is all rubbish. It means that you are no longer human beings but only labor*" (Yamashita 259, italicized initially). This herculean and epic fight to the death encompasses a single but

expansive pushback against agreements like NAFTA and how the global North fabricates the existence of a universal society. Lee writes, “[Arcangel] denounces the very notion of a collective, singular subject position that stands as the ‘we’ in the ‘We are the world’…The novel also argues the need to conceive of a new collective subject positioning that can express the accelerated movement of capital and humans traversing the world” (Lee 502). Arcangel brings the global South with him because they have been excluded from these deals meant to include and help develop their communities with agreements such as NAFTA.

These “accelerated movements,” as Lee calls them, are envisioned by the magical elements of the natives arriving in Los Angeles within two days, which relates to Williams stating, “the speed with which we traverse space heightens the impact of globalization” (Williams 2). Typically, only capital and goods could freely cross the border as defined by the United States. However, with Arcangel and the magical properties of the orange carried with him, he can reverse the flow and instead migrate living, breathing humans who were previously invisible compared to their labor.

Finally, I would like to examine how Yamashita depicts trauma in her novel and the way magical realism assists her through individual and generational traumatic events. When Rafaela, a Mexican immigrant who takes care of her employer's house in Mexico, is attacked by her rapist, they both undergo a brief transformation “Her writhing twisted her body into a muscular serpent–sinuous and suddenly powerful. She thrashed at him with

vicious fangs…He screamed but returned snarling, pounced, eyes bloody with terror…Two tremendous beasts wailed and groaned, momentarily stunned by their transformations, yet poised for war (Yamashita 220). Yamashita describes this traumatic event in such a way as to relate this attack to the countless oppressive and agonizing events Rafaela's ancestors witnessed and were victims of. Their battle begins the flood of memories Latin America has suffered over the centuries by each other and invaders: "massacred men and women, their bloated and twisted bodies black with blood…one million more decaying with smallpox" (220). Once again, magical realism is broadened to entire civilizations and how the onset of globalization and Western imperialism has reduced them to illegals in their land. In the end, Rafaela ends up eating her rapist as the serpent, signaling an unmistakable perspective on women and Latin America. This perspective remains defiantly bold, exclaiming that it is impossible to subject the women of the South forever, and they will fight passionately for their rights.

Unlike Rafaela's sexual assault and Yamashita's magical transformation of the two characters, the attack upon the homeless encampment includes no magical details to reflect their tragedy. "A single shot heralded the ugly possibility of war. On cue, the thunder of a hundred helicopters announced their appearance…strafing the freeway with its dotted lines, bombing the valley with tear gas and smoke" (Yamashita 239). Like that of Allende's military coup d'état the reader witnesses the blanket assault as "the most militaristic of nations" descend upon its unhoused

citizens (239). This stretch of highway in Los Angeles, which came to be known as the 'FreeZone,' briefly halts the network of globalization and neoliberalist trade. As Bryan Yazell writes, "Yamashita's text stresses that the relatively small-scale gains made by this community were hard won, and ultimately, subject to reversals" (1448). Yamashita, similar to Allende, refuses to tell this scene with any magical elements. This is perhaps because she sought to describe the persecution the homeless face each day from local police. Alternatively, it may be describing how in an ever-enclosing world that attempts to combine all nations into one through globalization, any attempt to create a community that "fundamentally disrupts the market logic of globalization" will be met with violence and harsh criticism from the global North (Yazell 1443).

While both novels incorporate magical realism into their stories, these two authors use the genre to critique distinctively separate social issues. *The House of the Spirits* enables magical realism to help Allende's female characters overcome and heal from the trauma they are subjected to. Allende focuses on the individual within her story, where the supernatural functions as a method of finding oneself. With *Tropic of Orange*, Yamashita pushes magical realism to encompass global-spanning issues such as Western neoliberal policy, globalization, hyper-awareness of time, and, at times, trauma suffered by those most vulnerable in society. Her use of the fantastical brings magical realism to a societal level where even when it depicts a singular instance, such as sexual violence, it cannot help but

relate that attack to past centuries of countless violence. Magical realism has shifted into the contemporary with Yamashita's work, where no story is detached or isolated in an ever-increasing globalized world. The unreal within the contemporary portrays the current suffering of an individual through a global hyperawareness of where they stand in society and how their position intricately links transnational or multitemporal modes of connection. In the end, a genre closely linked to Latin American literature has been thrust into the contemporary world, where countless other members of marginalized communities contest to tell their own stories and those of their communities through the lens of the unreal. The contemporary desperately grasps for our attention, our individual space and history, and now, even the modes by which we choose to tell our stories.

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